

The Artemidorus papyrus

David Sedley

David Sedley introduces us to one of the most exciting and controversial papyri ever published – but is it genuine?!

The name of Artemidorus, a Greek geographer active around 100 B.C., rings few bells in the UK. Things are very different in Italy. Not long ago I met an 11-year-old Italian with a passion for historical mysteries, like the alleged prophecies of Nostradamus. The name ‘Artemidoro’ provoked an even greater outburst of excitement from him, followed by a flood of information. The mystery of the Artemidorus papyrus has long been big news in Italy, attracting frequent headlines in the national newspapers.

There are two reasons for its fame. The first is that this 2.5-metre-long papyrus is among the most extraordinary and magnificent documents to come out of Egypt. The handwriting and radiocarbon tests agree in dating it to the early first century A.D. After a rather uncertain history of rediscovery and reassembly, it was bought by a Turin bank in 2004 for 2.75 million euros – a little over a million euros per metre! And in 2008 a superb deluxe edition of it was published (C. Gallazzi, B. Kramer, S. Settis, *Il papiro di Artemidoro*), accompanied by a complete facsimile of the papyrus.

Here are the main surprises it contains:

- A passage, written in bizarrely unconventional Greek, singing the praises of geography as a discipline. Geography, its author assures us (but without being able to spell the word correctly), is closely akin to that most divine of all disciplines, philosophy. What after all is philosophy, if not the geography of reality itself?
- A further passage, known on the basis of other evidence to come from book 2 of Artemidorus’ lost geographical treatise, and describing the coast of the Iberian peninsula.
- A map. What it is a map of remains quite uncertain, but it is the earliest preserved map from classical antiquity.
- On the back (‘verso’) of the papyrus, more than 40 pictures of exotic animals, mixing real and fantastic creatures without discrimination. Thanks to the captions naming them, we find ourselves confronted with such delights as the amazing ‘panther-crocodile’, the man-eating ‘Stymphalian bird’ of Greek myth, a four-legged ‘swordfish’ locked in mortal

combat with a snake-bodied ‘tuna’ (!), a gryphon swooping on a leopard from above, and a ‘star-dog’ (*astrokyōn*). Mixed in with these are the more humble ‘wild goat’ (*kriagrōn*), beaver, tiger, camel, giraffe, ‘goose-fox’ (sadly not a fabulous hybrid, but a real species now known as the Egyptian goose), a bird of uncertain identity called the ‘water-watcher’ (*hydroskopos*), and, seemingly its aquatic opposite number, a fish called the ‘sky-watcher’ (*ourano-skopos*).

- Elegant anatomical sketches of human heads, feet, and hands, so technically advanced that some have found them scarcely imaginable before the Renaissance.

Unravelling its secrets

What can these motley items all have been doing in a single roll of papyrus? The question continues to be hotly debated in innumerable books, articles, and conferences. Certainly the roll must have been used during its lifetime for more than one purpose. For example, a favoured suggestion runs, it started out as a luxury edition of Artemidorus book 2, with the first passage (the eulogy of geography) as the book’s introduction or proem; but the wrong map somehow got copied into the space that had been reserved for a map of Spain, and as a result the scroll was quickly abandoned. Later, it is suggested, the verso and the spare spaces on the main writing side (‘recto’) were used for art repertoires, including perhaps a catalogue of styles for statue production – hence the sketches of heads, hands, and feet.

Some of this speculation depends on the order in which the separate pieces are reassembled. The torn up fragments of the scroll are understood to have been found in early 20th-century Egypt in a compressed bundle of scraps that had probably been used for stuffing a cavity. Their modern restorers had first to separate them out, then painstakingly reassemble them in their original arrangement. How can the original sequence be recovered? Unfortunately, but also fortunately, at some stage in the scroll’s life exposure to damp caused ink to be transferred in

mirror image from layer to layer, and these matching marks are vital for working out which bit stood where when it was rolled up. Matching marks should for example be expected to be grouped closer to each other towards the centre of the roll than in the outer parts. (As it happens, the centre corresponds in this case not to the scroll’s end but to its beginning, because the last reader to use it had not bothered to rewind it.)

Close study of the transferred ink traces has enabled Giambattista D’Alessio, Professor of Greek Language and Literature at King’s College London, to build a very powerful case for altering the order adopted in the 2008 published edition. In that publication, the praise of geography was placed directly before Artemidorus’ description of Spain, and was therefore assumed to be the preface to book 2 of his treatise. D’Alessio has now shown that the eulogy must have been positioned after the passage on Spain. If so, it seems that what we have here was never intended to be a single continuous text of Artemidorus. It may instead be a geographical miscellany, comprising excerpts from geographical writings (quite possibly by more than one author), a map, and a gallery of exotic beasts. Only the anatomical sketches need have been added later, perhaps at a time when the scroll had acquired the status of virtual scrap paper.

Defending its antiquity

I mentioned earlier that there are two reasons for the fame of the Artemidorus papyrus. I have talked about the first, its extraordinary content. The second reason could scarcely be more different. It is the possibility that the papyrus is a modern fake.

The theory of a faked papyrus was first developed, and continues to be argued with almost messianic fervour, by the Italian scholar Luciano Canfora. In addition to a series of books, he has campaigned to keep the issue constantly in the headlines, where he and his supporters put it across with a mixture of serious scholarship, personal invective of a kind still regrettably found in Italian academic politics, and journalistic sensationalism.

Canfora’s hypothesis is that the papyrus was in fact faked by a notorious 19th-

century Greek forger, Constantine Simonides. It has to be admitted that Simonides' profile and record as a master forger of ancient Greek papyri do fit the papyrus rather well in some regards. What is more, he is known to have had a strong interest in Artemidorus. It is largely because of Canfora's crusade against the papyrus's authenticity that argument has raged, regarding the texts and drawings alike, as to whether or not they really can date from the early first century A.D. Weighty scholarly judgements are by now lined up on both sides of the debate. The majority of papyrologists – scholars specializing in the contents and physical characteristics of ancient papyri – continue to be in favour of authenticity. But influential scholarly voices have been heard on the other side too.

When all is said and done, there remains one extremely strong argument for the authenticity of the Artemidorus papyrus. The style of handwriting, by common consent, is that of the early first century A.D. Small portions of the papyrus have been sent for radiocarbon testing, and have yielded a result which likewise indicates (within the usual modest margin of error) the early first century A.D. That is to say, the physical papyrus and the handwriting on it are a close chronological match. There seems no credible way that, a century before carbon-dating was even conceivable, a forger could have secured this result, or, even if he could have secured it, would have seen any merit in doing so. Allow for the sake of argument that Simonides was lucky enough to get hold of a large blank sheet of Egyptian papyrus, in more or less undamaged condition (since examination of the papyrus has established that the damage visible in it occurred after the writing was present). How plausible is it that, without the aid of any kind of dating test, he not only somehow established an accurate dating of it, but also took the trouble to fake handwriting that would match that date – presumably for fear that science might otherwise in some future age be able to expose the forgery?

Nevertheless, there is probably just one way in which the debate could finally be laid to rest. The ink too, like the papyrus, could be carbon-dated. It is a good bet that the result would place writing and pictures alike either in the first century or in the nineteenth, and both sides would be obliged to accept the evidence as conclusive. Unfortunately to do so would mean destroying a significant quantity of the penmanship, and that is regarded as an unacceptably high price to pay. But with a full photographic record now secured, are we quite sure that there wouldn't be a case for making the sacrifice, and giving truth priority over conservation?

Ancient Philosophy at Cambridge. He is certainly the real deal!

David Sedley is Laurence Professor of